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Book Reviews

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Review of *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* by Amber Jamilla Musser (NYU Press)

Stephen Felder

ABSTRACT In *Sensual Excess*, Amber Jamilla Musser develops an epistemological project that calls into question modes of producing knowledge around black and brown bodies, especially in relationship to femininity and queerness. In doing so, she interrogates the kind of racialized understandings of femininity produced by what Hortense Spillers has called "pornotroping" in order to draw a contrast to something Musser calls "brown jouissance." She is looking for those places where fleshly experience exceeds the ideological constraints of the pornotropic image, developing an epistemology based not on the visual, but on the affective experiences of the flesh. In doing so she analyzes Lyle Ashton Harris's *Billie #21* (2002), Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), Mickalene Thomas's *Origin of the Universe 1* (2012), Cheryl Dunye's *Mommy is Coming* (2012), Amber Hawk Swanson and Sandra Ibarra's *Untitled Fucking* (2013), Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–1996), Nao Bustamantes's *Neapolitan* (2003), and Maureen Catabagan's *Crush* (2010–2012).

Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance. By Amber Jamilla Musser. New York: NYU Press, 2018, pp. 247. ISBN 9781479830954 (paperback). US List \$27.

In *Sensual Excess*, Amber Jamilla Musser develops an epistemological project that calls into question modes of producing knowledge around black and brown bodies, especially in relationship to femininity and queerness. In doing so, she interrogates the kind of racialized understandings of femininity produced by what Hortense Spillers has called "pornotroping" in order to draw a contrast to something Musser calls "brown jouissance." She is looking for those places where fleshly experience exceeds the ideological constraints of the pornotropic image, developing an epistemology based not on the visual, but on the affective experiences of the flesh. Following Rey Chow, she argues that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* becomes a "history of the ascendancy of whiteness" because of the "epistemological whiteness" that grounds the discourse of sexuality. In contrast, she calls for us to "think with the flesh, with the sensual" as a way to "make new knowledges and new politics" (179).

Musser interrogates a number of visual artistic expressions that, through their visibility, do not produce a transparent access to the black/brown feminine subject (as object), but which confront the viewer at some level with an opacity. Her analysis includes Lyle Ashton Harris's *Billie #21* (2002), Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), Mickalene Thomas's *Origin of the Universe 1* (2012), Cheryl Dunye's *Mommy is Coming* (2012), Amber Hawk Swanson and Sandra Ibarra's *Untitled Fucking* (2013), Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–1996), Nao Bustamantes's *Neapolitan* (2003), and Maureen Catabagan's *Crush* (2010–2012). For Musser, to think with this opacity is to be "insistently thinking with the *possibility*, however momentary, of illegibility rather than a stabilized notion of resistance" (11). This

opacity can thus become the basis of a minoritarian strategy to interrogate the images of the pornotrope.

For Musser, “to think with pornotroping is to acknowledge that some people circulate as highly charged affective objects, while simultaneously being positioned outside of the parameters of normative sexuality and subjectivity” (8). She is interested in the space, both conceptual and lived, opened up by this idea. In doing so she extends an idea she explores throughout *Sensational Flesh*, namely, the idea that black women are posited as the “fleshy limit of theory.” Similarly, in this book she wants to use the pornotrope as a way to name “the fleshiness of black and brown people” and to unpack “affective and sensational circuits of power and performance” in relationship to signification so that we might “read otherwise” (9). This strategy to “read otherwise” is crucial to her project, both for how she deploys it in reading the visual displays and performances in the works she analyzes and for the ways in which she invites us to read the (performance) of black and brown femininity “otherwise.” In doing so, her strategy is often to focus on excess as a way to circumnavigate “questions of sovereign subjectivity and desire to show us epistemologies rooted in opacity and sensuality” (9). Her aim is for us to embrace the possibility that by developing an epistemology of fleshiness, by “conjoining flesh and knowledge” in a way that “emphasizes theorizing as a fleshy activity, both because theory emerges from flesh—positionality matters—and because theory is enacted by bodies; thought can be located outside of the linguistic, in and through the body and its movements” (11).

For example, in her analysis of Harris’s *Billie #21* she focuses on the citational nature of Harris’s image in which, by linking his body to Holiday’s, the image “emphasizes gesture as a mode of knowledge transmission” that “allows us to ponder what exactly one inhabits when one borrows from Holiday” (18). But she also sees the object, the Polaroid itself, as a “material manifestation” of what she coins “brown jouissance.” The aesthetic that comes to the fore in this relationship between viewer and object “highlights brown jouissance’s refusal of transparency.” The Polaroid’s (re-)production of a ghostly image implies a kind of intimacy with the “image-subject” that Harris’s citational gesture evokes while refusing the transparency implied by such an image. Muller argues that “hunger is a form of brown jouissance at work in the sensual excess of the photograph” and to argue in this way is to “suture the citational self and the Polaroid’s materialization of temporality to insatiability and vulnerability” enabling us to ask “whether the oscillations between Thing, object, and Other that speak to hunger and its vulnerability are also structured by impermanence, layered temporality, and the plural, porous self of citation” (19). Musser’s analysis often tends towards this kind of interrogative openness, inviting the reader to engage in the kind of fleshy epistemology that is at stake in her project. It is in this way that she develops the idea of brown jouissance as a way to reorient ourselves around the epistemological and political questions so central to racialization, queerness, and femininity, and the relations among the three.

In this regard, Musser contends that queer femininity is an important “order of knowledge” arising from sensuality and fleshiness. This order of knowledge “resists the mandate of depth even as it traffics in self-creation . . . a spatiality of possibility, of the always-already, of not-quite-return or homeland, of embrace, plurality, spirituality, and sensuality . . . It is what emerges from and yet exceeds the pornotrope” (178). In multiple ways, she shows how “race disrupts attempts to think sexuality as the primary frame of difference” (178). Her interpretive strategy enacts more than a call to inclusion; it is an attempt to disrupt the “epistemological whiteness of sexuality” by showing how “the black and brown mother and queer femininity disrupt sexuality with sensuality and shift us away from a discourse of desire and individuality toward plural, porous selves and

multiple modes of being-with.” According to Musser, the epistemologies that can emerge from the disruption of brown jouissance/queer femininity mobilize “opacity in lieu of transparency, sensuality instead of recognition, and regendre-ing instead of incest” (178).

Musser’s concept of “brown jouissance” is inspired by Jacques Lacan’s development of the concept of jouissance, especially as presented in Néstor Braunstein’s article on jouissance in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. She wants to use the Lacanian concept to “think more precisely around the politics that surround the sensations of being a body” (12). This move might surprise some Lacanians, but she is interested in Braunstein’s description of jouissance as “positivity . . . ‘something’ lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure” (in Musser, 13). She then interprets this to mean we can think of jouissance as an “excess of sensation” (13). She uses Lacan’s assertion that “jouissance is on the side of the [Freudian] Thing;” (Lacan contrasted this to Desire, which is “on the side of the Other”) to argue that the Thing (instead of the object) “is related to jouissance because it possesses a direction separate from the subject, which is to say it is a space of impossibility and illegibility” (13). But she seems to find something limiting about the ability of the Lacanian concept of jouissance to engage with issues related to race and gender such that her own adaptation, “brown jouissance,” attempts to focus on the “moments when Thing, Other, and object converge to form selfhood” (13). Perhaps her idea of brown jouissance can also be seen as an attempt to reconfigure a particularly American history of jouissance accessed by way of the signifiers of slavery and otherness. It would be worthwhile then to read her development of brown jouissance in concert with Sheldon George’s reading of the Lacanian concept in *Race and Trauma*.

Ultimately, Musser’s analysis opens up new spaces for thinking the identities shaped by white supremacy by focusing on the emergence of (sensual) excess in “brown jouissance.” This brown jouissance, by its very failure to refer to a stable identity, points to what is implied by the subtitle of Lacan’s Seminar XX, namely, “*The Limits of Love and Knowledge*,” for Musser it is the limit of knowledge, the failure of any account to stabilize identity, that emerges from sensual excess.

 [Bio](#)

Stephen Felder

Stephen Felder is a Professor of Humanities at Irvine Valley College. His research focuses on the ways in which ideology and subjectivity emerge in the construction of meaning, and how those meanings serve larger political, social, and economic interests. His most recent work has focused on the use of epistemology and psychoanalysis in the critique of popular culture and political ideology.

